

# **An Analysis of College Students' Perceptions on Domestic Minor Sex Trafficking in Pine Bluff, Arkansas**

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## **Abstract**

*Domestic minor sex trafficking (DMST) is modern-day slavery of children and the commercial sexual abuse of children through buying, selling, or trading their sexual services. DMST is a form of child abuse. The victim can be any person of nationality, age, socioeconomic status, or gender. In America, throughout college campuses, a lot of students are not informed of domestic minor sex trafficking. When thinking about domestic minor sex trafficking, most people do not think that this crime happens in our country, better yet our state of Arkansas.*

*The purpose of this study was to investigate the perceptions of college students attending the University of Arkansas at Pine Bluff on domestic minor sex trafficking in our country and in our state of Arkansas (a crime that is growing aggressively in the United States).*

*Fifty participants who were students attending the University of Arkansas at Pine Bluff participated in the study. Participants consisted of male and female students between the ages of 18 to 25 (N = 30 Females; N = 20 Males). Survey data were analyzed using Microsoft Excel software. Participants responded to ten yes or no descriptive questions about domestic minor sex trafficking (e.g., Questions like: have you heard about domestic minor sex trafficking; and do you think child sex trafficking is an organized crime).*

*The data yielded both quantitative and qualitative results. Results showed that female students were more knowledgeable and were more aware of DMST than males. Implications for interventions will be discussed. Further research also is suggested.*

## **Introduction**

This research was to explore the perceptions of college students on domestic minor sex trafficking (DMST) and to join in evidence on risk factors for DMST. Many people are familiar with the concern of

human trafficking, but many are not aware of the arising issues and concerns of young children that are becoming victims of sex trafficking.

The purpose of this study was to investigate the perceptions college students attending the University of Arkansas on domestic minor sex trafficking in our country and in our state of Arkansas (a crime that is growing aggressively in the United States). The study will also inform what type of minors are at risk of DMST and why minors are more vulnerable.

Domestic minor sex trafficking is the illegal movement of people, within national or across international borders, for the purposes of exploitation in the form of commercial sex, domestic service, or manual labor.

## **Statement of the Problem**

Approximately 800,000 to 900,000 victims annually are trafficked across international borders. Between 18,000 and 20,000 victims are trafficked into United States annually. More than half of victims trafficked into United States are thought to be children; victims are probably about equally women and men. Victims can be trafficked into the U.S. from anywhere.

Domestic Minor Sex Trafficking (DMST) consists of prostituting or pimping of a minor, a victim that is under the age of 18, who is used in a commercial sex act as a trafficking victim. This crime also includes pornography, stripping, escort services, and other sexual services.

Potential Minors with greater risks of DMST are: Runaways, Homeless, Foster care youths, Drug addicted, Poverty stricken, and Mental health issues.

This investigation aimed to shed light about the perceptions of college students on domestic minor sex trafficking and to educate others on risk factors for DMST. Many people are familiar with the concern of human trafficking, but many are not aware of the arising issues and concerns of young children that are becoming victims of sex trafficking. Domestic minor sex trafficking is the illegal movement of people, within national or across international borders, for the purposes of exploitation in the form of commercial sex, domestic service or manual labor.

In America, throughout college campuses, a lot of students are not informed of domestic minor sex trafficking. When thinking about domestic minor sex trafficking, most people don't actually think that this crime happens in our country, better yet our state of Arkansas. They often think that this crime is committed in foreign countries. Domestic Minor Sex Trafficking (DMST) consist of prostituting or pimping of a minor, a victim that is under the age of eighteen, who is used in a commercial sex act is a trafficking victim. This crime also includes pornography, stripping, escort services, and other sexual services.

Potential Minors with greater risks of DMST are:

- Runaways
- Homeless
- Foster care youths
- Drug addicted
- Poverty

- Mental health

A trafficker may recruit these minors online, at public events, in malls, schools, on the streets, and in shelters. Traffickers also utilize technology to reach potential minor on social medial sites or pose as talent or modeling scouts online and intimidate minors into sending personal information and pictures online. Social media, smart phones, and webcams offer traffickers access to minors in developing ways to share pictures, market their victims, and maintain further control over their victims. Traffickers may be adults or other youth that gain trust of their victims through a process commonly referred to as grooming. Research has shown traffickers may also exploit other vulnerabilities or factors in a child’s life such as existing trauma, low self-esteem, isolation from family or friends, lack of basic resources, sexual orientation, homelessness, or criminal behavior. For example, it has been reported by Timeline that the famous alleged R &B legend R. Kelly recruited women as young as 18, banned them from communicating with their family and friends, controlled what they wore and ate, and recorded sexual encounters with them. The parents of the two women believed their daughters were being held against their will, and have attempted unsuccessfully to have law enforcement intervene. R. Kelly had never been convicted of sexual misconduct during the time of this study.

The objective of this study was to obtain the perceptions of college students on domestic minor sex trafficking and to bring awareness to college students about this crime. This is crime that is unseen. The crime has limited awareness in that it was not shared with the public. The students here at our university need to understand that this crime is alive and present here in our state of Arkansas. This study is important to all students and minors, so that they will not become a victim to DMST. The benefit of this study is to bring awareness to college student about this hidden crime. A list of potential indicators of DMST is listed below.

Some Potential Indicators of Domestic Minor Sex Trafficking include the following:

- Extreme changes in behavior, such as loss of appetite
- Fear of the dark or sleep disturbances—nightmares, bed-wetting, fear of sleeping alone, or loss of sleep
- Regression to more youthful behavior such as thumb-sucking or excessive crying
- Expressing affection in ways inappropriate for a child of their age
- Unusual interest in or knowledge of sexual matters, or excessive masturbation
- Vaginal or rectal bleeding, pain, itching, swollen genitals, vaginal discharge, or sexually transmitted diseases
- Fear or intense dislike of a particular person or being left in a particular place
- Suicide attempts
- Getting excessive phone messages or calls
- Sexualized activity or conversations not developmentally appropriate for the child’s age
- Having a significantly older boyfriend or girlfriend
- Entering or leaving cars or taxis with unknown persons
- Alcohol and drug use
- Having unaffordable new things such as clothes, money, or technological devices

Children who have been trafficked find it hard to tell anyone what happened to them. They change their stories, discrepancies in their story and many don't speak English. They are also afraid to speak out to authorities, afraid of what might happen to their family, friends, or themselves if they tell.

Now that we have identified potential victims and potential indicators of DMST about whom the victim might be, some characteristics of the traffickers/pimps/perpetrators will be described.

Characteristics of traffickers/pimps/perpetrators:

- Jealous, controlling and violent behavior
- Significantly older than female companions
- Pushy or demanding about sex
- Vague about his/her profession
- Promise things that seem too good to be true
- Encourage victims to engage in illegal activities to achieve their goals and dreams
- Buy expensive gifts or owns expensive items
- Encourage inappropriate sexual behavior
- Makes the victim feel responsible for his/her financial stability.
- Very open about financial matters.

Based on the research from the National Center on Safe Supportive Learning Environments (2013), the researchers found that social workers who provide services to these victims indicate that feelings of isolation and abandonment are often reported. However, the lack of a support network increases the vulnerability to trafficking. It is important to note that many teenage girls may be at risk of being recruited into the commercial sex industry simply by virtue of their normal maturation process. Wanting to take risks, feeling misunderstood by parents, and seeking romantic relationships can increase girls' susceptibility to the recruitment tactics of sex traffickers or pimps. Findings also suggest that low self-esteem accompanies school failure for girls, and the resulting sense of a lack of self-worth may make them more vulnerable to recruitment.

There are many signs that indicate an adult is involved in child trafficking according to National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children (2017), such as:

- Making multiple visa applications for different children
- Acting as a guarantor for multiple visa application for children
- Travelling with different children who they are not related to or responsible for
- Insisting on remaining with and speaking for the child
- Living with unrelated or newly arrived children
- Abandoning a child or claiming not to know a child they were previously with

## **Definitions of the Study:**

Child (minor, juvenile, youth) Persons under the age of 18 unless, under the law applicable to the child, majority is attained earlier.

Exploitation - Unfair, if not illegal, treatment or use of somebody or something, usually for personal gain.

Labor trafficking -The recruitment, harboring, transportation, provision, or obtaining of a person for labor or services, through the use of force, fraud, or coercion, for the purpose of subjection to involuntary servitude, peonage, debt bondage, or slavery.

Pimp- Any person who participates in the transporting, harboring, or selling of a person for a commercial sex act. This term can be interchangeable with sex trafficker.

Sex trafficking- The recruitment, harboring, transportation, provision, or obtaining of a person for a commercial sex act in which that act is induced by force, fraud, or coercion or in which the person induced to perform such act has not attained 18 years of age.

## **Literature Review**

The best data estimates suggest that at least 100,000 American kids a year are victimized through the practice of child prostitution; that number ranges as high as 300,000 (National Center for Missing and Exploited Children, 2016). The National Human Trafficking Resource Center Hotline (NHTRC) reported a total of 36 human trafficking cases in Arkansas in 2015, including 29 cases of sex trafficking and 6 cases of labor trafficking. In 2014, 21 human trafficking cases were reported. Since 2007, the NHTRC has received reports of 112 cases of human trafficking in Arkansas.

Seventy-five percent of the child victims engaged in prostitution are under the control of a pimp (National Human Trafficking Resource Center). Estimates of 1.7 million runaway/ throwaway episodes happen every year and 1 out of 3 teens on the street will be lured into prostitution within 48 hours of leaving home (National Incidence Studies of Missing, Abducted, Runaway, and Throwaway Children, 2012).

In 2016, an estimated 1 out of 6 endangered runaways reported to the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children were likely child sex trafficking victims. Eighty- six percent of these likely sex trafficking victims were in the care of social services or foster care when they went missing (National Center for Missing and Exploited Children, 2016).

### Effects of Domestic Sex Trafficking:

Psychological Trauma

Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder

Major Depressive Disorder

Substance Abuse among Survivors

Sexual Transmitted Diseases

Suicide and Depression

Increased Risk of Injuries (rape, sexual assault)

Phobias and Panic Attacks

Feelings of Helplessness, Shame, Humiliation

Cultural Shock from Finding Themselves in Strange Country

Regardless of the significance of the problem, the incidence of DMST is difficult to measure. Experimental research has not conclusively defined the scope of the problem as of today. Meanwhile, there are some significant findings from past studies like these statistics for example:

- Pimps prey on victims as young as 12 to 14 years of age.
- One study estimates as many as 325,000 children in the U.S., Canada, and Mexico are at risk each year for becoming victims of sexual exploitation
- One study estimates 30% of shelter youth and 70% of street youth are victim of commercial sexual exploitation. They may engaged or be pressed into prostitution for “survival sex” to meet daily needs for food, shelter, or drugs.
- Pimps may earn hundreds of thousands of dollars every year from selling minors.
- 75% of child victims engaged in prostitution are under the control of a pimp.

Historically, law enforcement and probation departments across the nation have been the primary systems addressing the complex needs of survivors of child sex trafficking. Through sting operations, crackdowns on gangs, and curfew sweeps, a law enforcement agency may be the first agency to interact with a sex trafficking victim. Today, child welfare systems and runaway and homeless youth programs are increasingly elevating their responses to child trafficking. It is strongly recommended that each community develop cross-system mechanisms and organization for collaboration among public agencies and other participants, while building upon the processes and relationships already in place.

## **Methodology**

**Researcher’s Role:** The researcher was an undergraduate student at the University of Arkansas at Pine Bluff. The student was senior-level and enrolled in a Senior Seminar capstone course during Fall 2017. The Senior Seminar student developed a consent form, a survey, and other research-related work assigned.

**Instrumentation:** The questionnaire which contained 10 descriptive questions was given to each participant that measured the perceptions of college students on domestic minor sex trafficking who were attending the University of Arkansas at Pine Bluff in Jefferson County, Arkansas.

**Data Collection:** Data collection was begun in mid-October 2017 and ended in November 2017. Consent forms were completed before the surveys were administered. Anonymity and confidentiality were assured and maintained.

**Data Analysis:** The Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) and Excel constructed the analysis of the results for this research. Data yielded mixed results.

**Limitation:** The study was conducted during a 10 week-period within the Fall Semester of 2017. The duration time frame of the investigation was limited and may affect the results of the study.

## **Results**

For this research study, 50 participants that was selected from on campus were administered surveys in Senior Seminar on research topic, “Perceptions of College Students on Domestic Minor Sex Trafficking.” The various experimental methodologies employed reflect studies documenting the effect and knowledge of domestic minor sex trafficking. Participants consisted of male and female students

between the ages 18 to 25. This research study investigated college students' awareness of domestic minor sex trafficking. The questions are displayed in table chart examples 1 and 2. The following research questions were asked:

- 1) Have you heard about domestic minor sex trafficking?
- 2) Did you know that domestic sex trafficking exist in Pine Bluff, AR?
- 3) Are children being trafficking in Pine Bluff?
- 4) Do you think domestic minor sex trafficking a major crime?
- 5) Do you think domestic minor sex trafficking an organized crime?
- 6) Would you contact someone if you suspected domestic minor sex trafficking?
- 7) Do you know of any victim or survivor of domestic minor sex trafficking?
- 8) Have you ever received any formal education (ex: training classes or seminars) on domestic minor sex trafficking?
- 9) Are you interested in learning about domestic minor sex trafficking?
- 10) Are all victims of domestic minor sex trafficking females?

The survey questions were distributed by the student researcher to students in her class and random students across campus. A total of 50 surveys were distributed and collected. The survey data were analyzed using Microsoft Excel software. The participants responded to ten yes or no questions about Domestic Minor Sex Trafficking. For instance, questions like: have you heard about Domestic Minor Sex Trafficking and do you think child sex trafficking is an organized crime? The data that were analyzed yielded both quantitative and qualitative results.

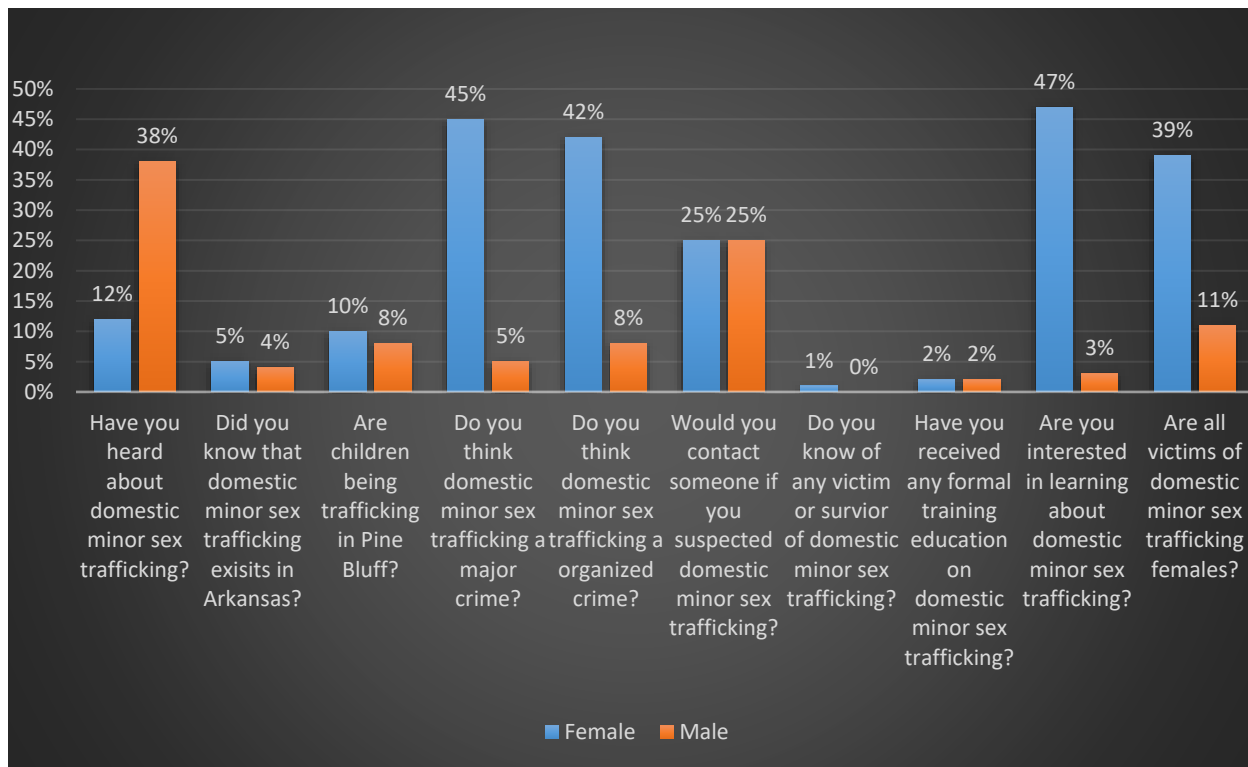
The graphs below depict the results reported by the participants. The targeted audience consisted of 50 students on campus (N=30 females; and N=20 males). Of the participants, 12 people had not heard about domestic minor sex trafficking, while the other 38 participants had heard about domestic minor sex trafficking. The interviews and results were based on factoring the gender of our participants, and the percentage of knowledge per questions. Race and age information were not a factor while conducting this interview. The basic demographic results of the interviews based on the ten questions asked are shown below.

Table 1 show a series of ten questions reflecting the percentage of who was knowledgeable about Domestic Minor Sex Trafficking.

According to the graph's designated color code below, the blue color represented the female responses while the orange color represented male responses.

The three graphs below depict the results reported by the participants.

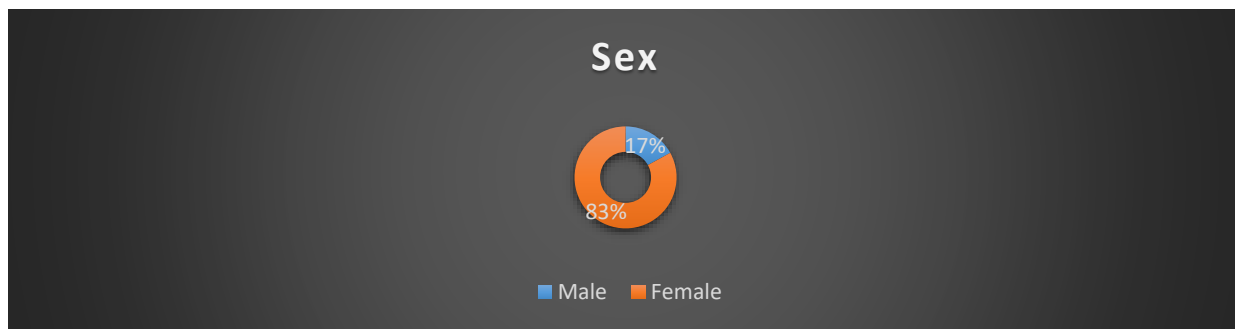
Example Table 1: Percentages of How Male and Female College Students Perceived Domestic Minor Sex Trafficking



In Example Table One, only 38% of males reported that they had heard about domestic minor sex trafficking, while 12% of females reported that they had heard about domestic minor sex trafficking. Five percent of females reported that they knew that domestic minor sex trafficking existed in Arkansas, while 4% of males reported that they knew of this crime existence in Arkansas. Ten percent of females reported that they were aware of children being trafficking in Pine Bluff, while 8% of males reported about this awareness in Pine Bluff. Forty-five percent of females reported that they think domestic minor sex trafficking was a major crime, while 5% of males reported that DMST was thought of as a major crime. Forty-two percent of females reported that they think domestic minor sex trafficking was an organized crime, while 8% males thought domestic minor sex trafficking was an organized crime. Twenty-five percent of both females and males stated that they would contact someone if they knew of someone that was a victim of DMST, while 0% males didn't know of anyone being a victim of DMST. Two percent of both females and males had received some type of training on DMST. Forty-eight percent of females were interested in learning about DMST, while 3% of males were interested in learning about DMST. Thirty-nine females believed that all victims of DMST are females, while 12% believed that all victims of DMST are females.

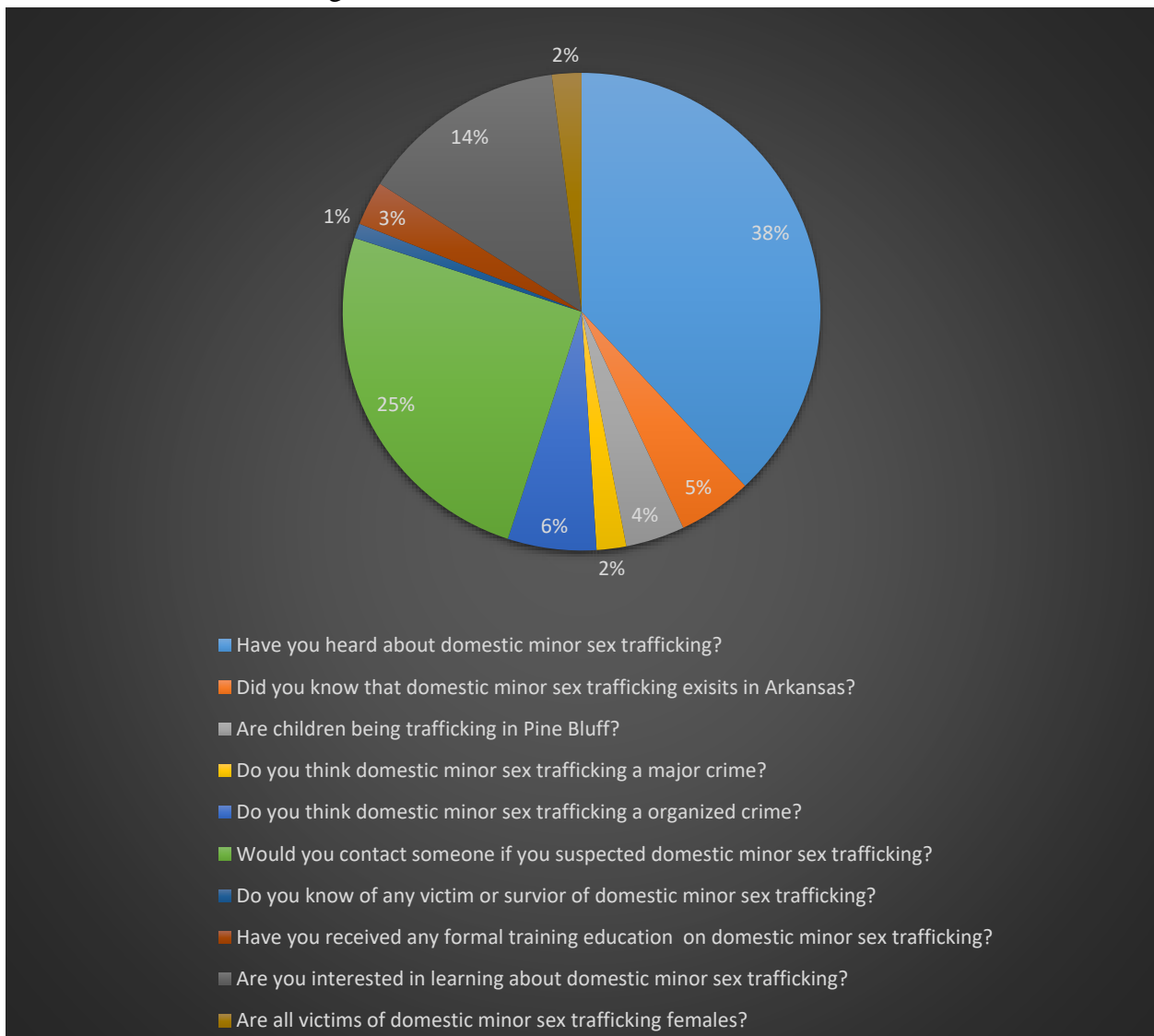


Example Table 2: Series of ten questions reflecting the Percentage by Gender that participated in the Study.



The chart above reflected that 17% of male students and 83% of female students had participated in the survey.

Example Table 3: Series of ten questions reflecting the percentage of who was knowledgeable about Domestic Minor Sex Trafficking.



Thirty-eight percent of the participants reported that they had heard about domestic minor sex trafficking, while 62% reported they had not heard. Five percent of participants reported that they knew that domestic minor sex trafficking existed in Arkansas, while 4% participants having reported that they were aware of children being trafficking in Pine Bluff. Two percent participants reported that they did think DMST was a major crime, while 6% participants reported they thought DMST was an organized crime.

Twenty-five percent participants reported they would contact someone if they suspected DMST, while 1% participants reported that they knew of a victim or survivor of domestic minor sex trafficking. Three percent participants reported that they had received some formal training education on domestic minor sex trafficking, while 14% participants reported that they were interested in learning more about domestic minor sex trafficking. Finally, two percent participants had perceived that all victims of DMST were females.

In the three graphs that were used in the study, they showed that the female students were more knowledgeable and were aware about DMST. It was interesting that both genders agreed that they would report or contact someone if they suspected DMST.

Participants also provided comments in regard to their perceptions on domestic minor sex trafficking. The qualitative results were as follows:

When asked whether children are being trafficking in Pine Bluff, one respondent replied, "I only know what I heard and seen, so # 3, I don't know how to answer that." One participant stated, " Sex trafficking is a heinous crime that needs to be stop." Another comment made by a participant was that, " I think it is important that everybody know the number so they can call if they think someone is sex trafficking, the number is 1-888-373-7888. I'm not sure if it is going on in Pine Bluff." Another comment from a participant was, " I am unaware if children are being trafficking in Pine Bluff, so I just stated no. I have heard about child sex trafficking but don't know much about child trafficking." Also, another participant stated, " I would like to learn more about this issue and how it may affect our local community and also I would like to know how often this crime occurs." A participant also stated, " Child sex trafficking or sex trafficking is a serious crime that gets swept under the rug or not public enough to cause the government to actually look into the crime. Some people say that the government is a part of sex trafficking." A participant also stated, " Not from Pine Bluff." Finally, the last comment from a participant stated, " I feel that no child should be treated as a sex object to please no man's or woman's own desire and this crime should be stopped and dealt with quickly; and this crime against our babies is sickening."

## **Conclusion**

In conclusion, perceptions of Domestic Minor Sex trafficking have evolved over time. Many years ago, Domestic Minor Sex Trafficking was nothing more than unrecognized crime. Generally, Domestic Minor Sex Trafficking was lumped in with prostitution and slavery. Today it is a growing recognized crime, a major public problem, and a topic of much research. Researchers have struggled to find why this crime is unreported and unseen. Despite this difficulty, research continues in more sophisticated directions and many community agencies are bringing this crime awareness to the public.

Domestic minor sex trafficking is a very serious crime as it affects our youth in many ways and persists into adulthood. There are many misconceptions about DMST and when this happens, this crime goes unreported or unseen. Therefore, there's a need for some clear understanding about trafficking. It is important to learn how to identify this horrible crime and start reporting signs or indications of DMST to law enforcers.

It is depressing to say that this crime is a terrible act for our minors to endure, but it is even sadder to know that it is not been reported. The sex trade of our children in the United States and our city of Pine Bluff, Arkansas is alive and well. Based upon a small convenience sample and the limitations of this exploratory study, it is suggested that further research needs to be done to shed more awareness on domestic minor sex trafficking in Pine Bluff, Arkansas as well as in our country. More education is needed to address this crime openly through seminars, research, partnerships with agencies such as the Department of Health and Human Services and the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children, and advocacy for students.

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